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ABSTRACT

The major assumption in this paper is that in order to improve social studies education, concepts and terminology must be clear and rigorous. Addressing three major points, the monograph discusses the types of situations calling for conceptual analysis, the definition of conceptual analysis, and aids for those interested in conceptual analysis. Conceptual analysis is called for when key concepts employed are either vague and/or ambiguous. Secondly, clarification of key terms is at the basis of sound research. The analysis of a concept is an act of investigation that focuses upon the use of language, and more specifically, upon the meanings which are implied in the use of language. Suggestions for those pursuing conceptual analysis are to locate a resource person skilled in the clarification of educational concepts and to do reading on one's own. A brief annotated bibliography of books that provide insights into what conceptual analysis is along with insights into techniques and procedures concludes the paper. (Author/SJM)

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CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS IN SOCIAL STUDIES RESEARCH

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CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS IN SOCIAL STUDIES RESEARCH

This afternoon I would like to talk to you about--what for lack of a more descriptive term will be called--conceptual analysis. I hope we can all address three questions: First, what type of situations call for conceptual analysis? Second, what is conceptual analysis? And, third, how does one get tooled up to do conceptual analysis?

What Type of Situations Call For Conceptual Analysis?

Edgar B. Wesley observed recently that, "For more than a decade the social studies have seethed with unrest and swirled with excitement. Social studies teachers have reconsidered old ideas, plans, and methods;...and have made progress by changing terminology." (Social Education, March 1972, p. 259) Wesley's charge is a serious one for it lumps social studies education together with a variety of hucksters, shamins and patent medicine peddlers. He claims that we are trying to sell as new a product which has had only a strip of chrome added to the old. But what has Wesley's charge to do with my topic, conceptual analysis?

Conceptual analysis, or linguistic analysis, seeks to clarify the terminology and language which is a part of our everyday and professional lives. Wesley's concern and my concern for the next few minutes is with the terminology of social studies education. The major theme running throughout this paper is that if we are to improve social studies education--not just change terminology--, then we must have concepts and terminology which are rigorous.

Terms such as "inquiry," "discovery," "problem solving," "critical thinking," "open classroom," "authoritarian," "traditional," (and I'm sure you can add some of your own) fall from our lips and flow from our

pens with abandon. The difficulty is not that we use such terms, but that ... ms mean different things to different people. So many concepts used also, and are, frequently vague in education, and more specifically in the social studies, are treated like newspapers, to be picked up, used, and discarded. It seems to me that we select our terminology more on the whims of the moment than on any reasoned basis.

One of the major barriers to a more rigorous social studies terminology is the argument that any attempt to clarify and analyze educational terms is "just semantics," "playing with words." Those who utter such charges usually argue that the real thing that educators must be concerned with is what is happening in classrooms.

(1) There are two weaknesses in this argument. First, to be careful and rigorous in the terms we use to describe classroom happenings does not down-play the importance of what is happening in classrooms. Rather, it heightens it. Educational terms must help us say things about what is happening in classrooms or these words should be disgarded. And (2) second, the paradox is that the less attention we pay to educational terminology the more we are in danger of simply stating empty phrases about nothing in particular. Without rigorous scrutiny words can become as free spinning wheels in space, unconnected and useless. Such free spinning wheels are only useful to hucksters, whether they be of the used car, political or educational kind. In short, educational terminology can, without scrutiny, impede valuable educational goals. As Austin, an English philosopher has pointed out, "...words are our tools, and, as a minimum, we should use clear tools: we should know what we mean and what we do not, and we must forearm ourselves against the traps that language sets for us."[1]

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[1] J.L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," Ordinary Language, N.C. Chappell (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentic Hall, Inc. 1964), p. 45.

What does all this have to do with social studies research? I think it has everything to do with it. Lack of clear conceptualizations renders empirical research useless. To the extent that the concepts or variables we wish to study are not clearly conceptualized, we can expect very little payoff from our empirical investigations. A vivid example of this can be seen in Merwin's recent review of 10 years of research on "inquiry." He ~~found~~ reported a patchwork of frequently conflicting findings. My interpretation of Merwin's review as well as my own reading of empirical research on inquiry in the social studies leads me to believe that the patchwork of findings results in large part from a patchwork of oftentimes conflicting conceptions of what is being investigated. I might add that not only is empirical research itself hamstrung by weak conceptualization of variables, but those who would like to learn something from other's research are hamstrung in their interpretation of research findings.

Social studies educators are not alone in this boat. I was interested to read in a recent article by Eisner in School Review where he wrote,

> ...a review I did of the last two years of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Journal indicated that experimental studies reported in those volumes provide about three and a half to four times as much space to reporting findings of the studies as they do to describing the treatment. (August, 1972, p. 577)

Eisner is implying that we ~~simply~~ must pay more attention to the key concepts, or variables, we are using. For example, we simply should not say that we are doing research contrasting "discovery" teaching and "traditional" teaching and leave it at that, for no matter how powerful our statistical tests and no matter how statistically significant our results, it is for the most part in vain if we don't know what it is we have done.

I began this section with the question, "What types of situations call for conceptual analysis?" To summarize, I have made two points. First, conceptual analysis is called for when the key concepts we are employing

are either vague and/or ambiguous. And second, the effort to clarify key terms is not an activity peripheral to research, but is at the very heart of sound research.

What Is Conceptual Analysis?

One way to understand conceptual analysis is to contrast it with other more familiar types of research. At the risk of oversimplifying, it seems to me that researchers ask three types of questions: conceptual, empirical and policy questions. Let's look at each of these briefly.

Conceptual questions deal with meanings. For example, when we ask ourselves what do we mean by a "traditional teacher" or what do we mean by "critical thinking" we are asking conceptual questions.

Empirical questions deal with observable, quantifiable phenomena. For example, we are asking an empirical question when we ask what percentage of teachers in today's social studies classes are "traditional?" Or, to what extent are students learning to be critical thinkers as they use the American Political Behavior curriculum?

Finally, policy questions deal with questions of should and ought, what decisions we should make, how we should proceed. For example, we may ask ourselves "do we wish to stress critical thinking in our social studies classes and, if so, how can this be done?" Or, "should our school district given a high percentage of traditional teachers invest in curriculum materials which are non-traditional in their intent?"

Thus, conceptual analysis differs from other major types of research in terms of the type of question it is designed to answer. To further clarify what conceptual analysis is let's take a look at ways in which we can go about answering conceptual questions, that is, questions of meaning.

There are several ways of dealing with questions of meaning.(1) The first is simply to ignore such questions. The results of this make our attempts to improve knowledge about education fruitless, for to be harsh, but quite literally true, we don't know what we are talking about.(2) A second way is to turn to an authority. This is quite satisfactory if the "authorities" are in agreement; however, this is frequently not the case. Also, there is an added problem which faces the researcher. Frequently the researcher demands a more rigorous definition or conception than is available. Thus, even though he may find some general consensus among authorities, their conceptions may not be adequately rigorous for carrying out empirical research.(3) A third way is found frequently in empirical research. This is the stipulated definition. A researcher stipulates a definition when he says "By 'critical thinking' I will mean A, B, and C, or "By 'open-classroom' I will mean X, Y and Z. That is, the researcher alerts his audience to the possibility that his definition may be unique, from all other uses of the term. The advantage of this approach is that it enables the researcher to head out in new directions and to help us see things in a way we might not have otherwise seen them. The danger of stipulation is that it may end up giving us lots of nice information about nothing we are interested in. (Our use of the term may not coincide with others.)

Finally, the researcher may choose the road of description and analysis. Whereas the previous approaches enable the researcher to get rather quickly to the empirical tasks of gathering quantifiable data, the analysis of a concept is, itself, an act of investigation.

To understand the rudiments of this approach let me again contrast it with empirical and policy research. Again, to oversimplify, the empirical researcher looks to the observable, quantifiable, phenomenal world. The

researcher of policy issues looks not only to the phenomenal world but he also makes use of relevant values, feelings, and attitudes.

In contrast to these two types of research, the investigation of conceptual questions focuses upon the use of language, and more specifically, upon the meanings which are implied in the use of language, That is, linguistic utterances, the use of language among a relevant group of people is the source of data with which conceptual analysis begins. Conceptual analysis starts with the description and analysis of what people mean when they use a term such as "inquiry," "skill," "traditional method," or "critical thinking." In seeking to answer questions of meaning the investigator ~~needs to~~ may ask himself prior questions such as the following:

What are the different situations in which this term is used?

Does this term have different meanings in different situations?

Am I interested in clarifying the meaning of this term in all of the situations in which it is used or am I interested in a limited set of situations, or contexts?

Is the problem of meaning one of ambiguity or of vagueness?

If the problem is one of ambiguity, what are the alternative meanings which are ambiguous?

If the problem is one of vagueness, how sharply do I want to clarify this vagueness? pragmatic

What are the central characteristics, or meanings, of this term?

What are the borderline, or peripheral, characteristics?

Is the problem of meaning found among the central or borderline characteristics?

These are the types of questions which the language analyst seeks to answer. Let me give a rather crude example which evolves from some research I am now engaged in.

A recent study I did in Delaware showed that "critical thinking" is something teachers of social studies value highly and it is also something which the teachers try to teach for. Yet, what is critical thinking?

Language analysts have alerted us to the need to seek meanings through an analysis of the way in which people use the term in question. A good place to look is the literature in education on "critical thinking," for that literature is an excellent source of raw data. Our analysis of the literature indicates that the concept of "critical thinking" is largely clouded by ambiguity. The ambiguity stems from what we have identified as two major alternative conceptions of critical thinking, which although related, are nevertheless different. (1) One equates critical thinking with Dewey's steps of reflective thinking. This meaning of critical thinking is closely related to the concept of problem solving and to one aspect of what is meant by inquiry. (2) Another conception of critical thinking describes it as a set of skills which can be used to assess the correctness of statements. These range from the broad and pervasive ability to grasp the central meaning of a statement to more specific skills such as identifying potential bias, the use of emotional words, distinguishing between primary and secondary sources, etc. A second characteristic which distinguishes these two notions of critical thinking is that the former notion which equates critical thinking with Dewey's reflective thinking and problem solving conceives of critical thinking as a creative act. That is, the person who is thinking critically is engaged in a problem solving act. On the other hand, ~~we might say that~~ the skill conception of critical thinking places the critical thinker in the role of evaluator and judge, the role of critic.

I would argue that our attention to the meaning of critical thinking has immeasurably enhanced our prospects for doing worthwhile empirical research. We have opted for the skill conception of critical thinking and will so stipulate our conception of critical thinking as we make results available.

I will now turn to the final topic of this paper.

How Does One Get Tooled Up To Do Conceptual Analysis?

At this point I would like to make what I believe are some practical suggestions for anyone who feels that he might wish to pursue conceptual analysis further.

Probably the single most efficient step would be to locate someone who is, himself, skilled in conceptual analysis and, even more important, has a grasp of the theory of meaning which underlies conceptual analysis. Unfortunately most philosophers who do conceptual analysis are not interested in the more practical considerations of how it can contribute to unsnarling educational problems, but they still may be of some assistance. (My own experience with an Oxford don who taught a course in Wittgenstein's philosophy led me rather quickly to see that the don was much more interested in answering philosophical questions than in attacking the kinds of issues I was interested in.) A much better choice is to find an educational philosopher who is interested in the clarification of educational concepts.

Another step is to do reading on your own. Let me make some suggestions of things I have found particularly useful. The first set of readings I list are about conceptual analysis. They both provide insights into what conceptual analysis is and insights into techniques and procedures for how one might go about conceptual analysis. A favorite little book is

John Wilson, Thinking with Concepts. Cambridge: At The University Press, 1969.

This is a primer on language analysis. It is easily read, provides a multitude of examples and also a variety of specific techniques. My guess is that you will need to order it specially.

A more theoretical, but nevertheless readable book is

William P. Alston, Philosophy of Language. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.; 1964.

This is part of a paperback philosophy series which is readily available in university bookstores. The second chapter "Meaning and the Use of Language" is particularly useful for it is a clear description of the theory that language meaning is a function of the way language is used.

Another source is

Jonas F. Soltis, An Introduction to the Analysis of Educational Concepts. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1968.

I found his first chapter helpful.

On the relationship between language and empirical research three readings were particularly helpful. These are

C. I. Lewis, "A Pragmatic Conception of the A Priori," The Journal of Philosophy, XX (March, 1923), 169-177.

Stephen Toulmin, "Concepts and the Explanation of Human Behavior," Human Action. Theodore Mischel. New York: Academic Press, 1969. pp. 71-104.

Peter Winch. The Idea of a Social Science. London: Routledge & Kengan Paul, 1958.

A second set of readings are examples of language analysis in education. Their titles are for the most part self-explanatory. One of the most useful readings I have encountered is

J. P. White, "Indoctrination." The Concept of Education (Edited by R. S. Peters). London: Routledge & Kengan Paul, 1967. 177-191.

Another reading opens up a different way of conceiving of education. This is

R. S. Peters, "Education as Initiation." Philosophical Analysis and Education. (Edited by Reginald D. Archanbault). New York: The Humanities Press, 1965. pp. 87-111.

I hope I have whetted your appetite enough so that you will consider the possibility of conceptual analysis as a research activity. At least, I hope to have reinforced the need for clear, hard-headed conceptualizations of the key concepts in social studies education.

T.F.
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